

VINCENT
VAN GOGH

AS SEEN BY
HIMSELF



"Etude à la bougie"
Arles 1888
Col. William Goetz
Los Angeles

VINCENT VAN GOGH AS SEEN BY HIMSELF

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This appreciation and appraisal of Vincent van Gogh by a psychiatrist is mainly a confession of guilt. Dr. Gachet was the only one who treated him with understanding, sympathy and with the physician's attitude of a true friend. We dissected afterwards his life story in an analytical manner, tagged a diagnosis to his illness, perverted his acts and omissions by interpreting them as symptoms, and tried to take mere assumptions and inferences for granted although we could not prove them. In the fashion of our time we labelled van Gogh alternately an epileptic, a paralytic, a neurotic, a schizophrenic and a psychopath. Temporal lobe epilepsy had hardly been born when psychomotor attacks were ascribed to him. Only recently Leibbrand said with concern that before long we were bound to find an anthropological interpretation of the "morbus van Gogh."

Not a word of excuse – although the dynamic nature and the mental structure of this master, as well as his life's work, are highly fascinating especially to the psychiatrist.

"Hinc et nunc" Vincent van Gogh will have an opportunity to speak for himself, and we shall likewise ask his expert friends to speak. His self-portraits are more than proof of his mastery. They demonstrate his "sovereign attitude towards his illness," as Jaspers has said. These self-portraits are true controls of his mental intactness, humble appeals for clemency in his struggle against a permanent threat. They are without doubt creations of great, original and artistic mastery, and, more than that, they are testimonials of increasing humaneness. Each one of them may be inscribed: "Ecce homo."

M

Vincent

Self-portrait. Antwerp 1885/86
Property of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation
City Museum, Amsterdam

From a letter to his brother

I prefer drawing human eyes to painting cathedrals.
For deep in a human eye there's something
that a cathedral does not have –
however impressive and solemn it may be.
I am more interested in the human soul, be it the soul
of a poor devil or that of a harlot, than in structures.



Self-portrait, 1886
Gemeentemuseum 's-Gravenhage/Holland

From a letter to his brother

The only question is whether the starting-point should be a man's soul or his clothes, whether the shape of the human body is merely a clothes-peg for bows and ribbons, or whether it should be considered a means to communicate feeling, to reproduce an emotional or mental impression.



Self-portrait. 1887
Property of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation
City Museum, Amsterdam

From a letter to his brother

When I compare myself with others,
I feel awkward and stiff as though I had remained
in solitary confinement for ten years.
That is because for about ten years I have been leading
such a hard and restless life
full of troubles and sorrow and without joy ...



Self-portrait with grey hat. Paris, about 1887
Property of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation
City Museum, Amsterdam

K. Bromig-Kolleritz

The line technique, which is so important here, suggests a peculiar textile-like structure which appears uniformly spread over the entire figure and which fills everything, beard, skin, hat, etc. The portrait faintly recalls a head made of matting with inserted eyes – the fixed stare being emphasised – which appears plastic on the surface but hollow inside.



Self-portrait with straw hat. Paris 1887
Property of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation
City Museum, Amsterdam

To his sister

Look at my example. I have accumulated
so many yearly circles that I am no longer in
a laughing mood, maybe through my own fault
or maybe not. At the same time
I have a real desire to laugh heartily once more.



Self-portrait. 1887
Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo/Holland

De la Faille

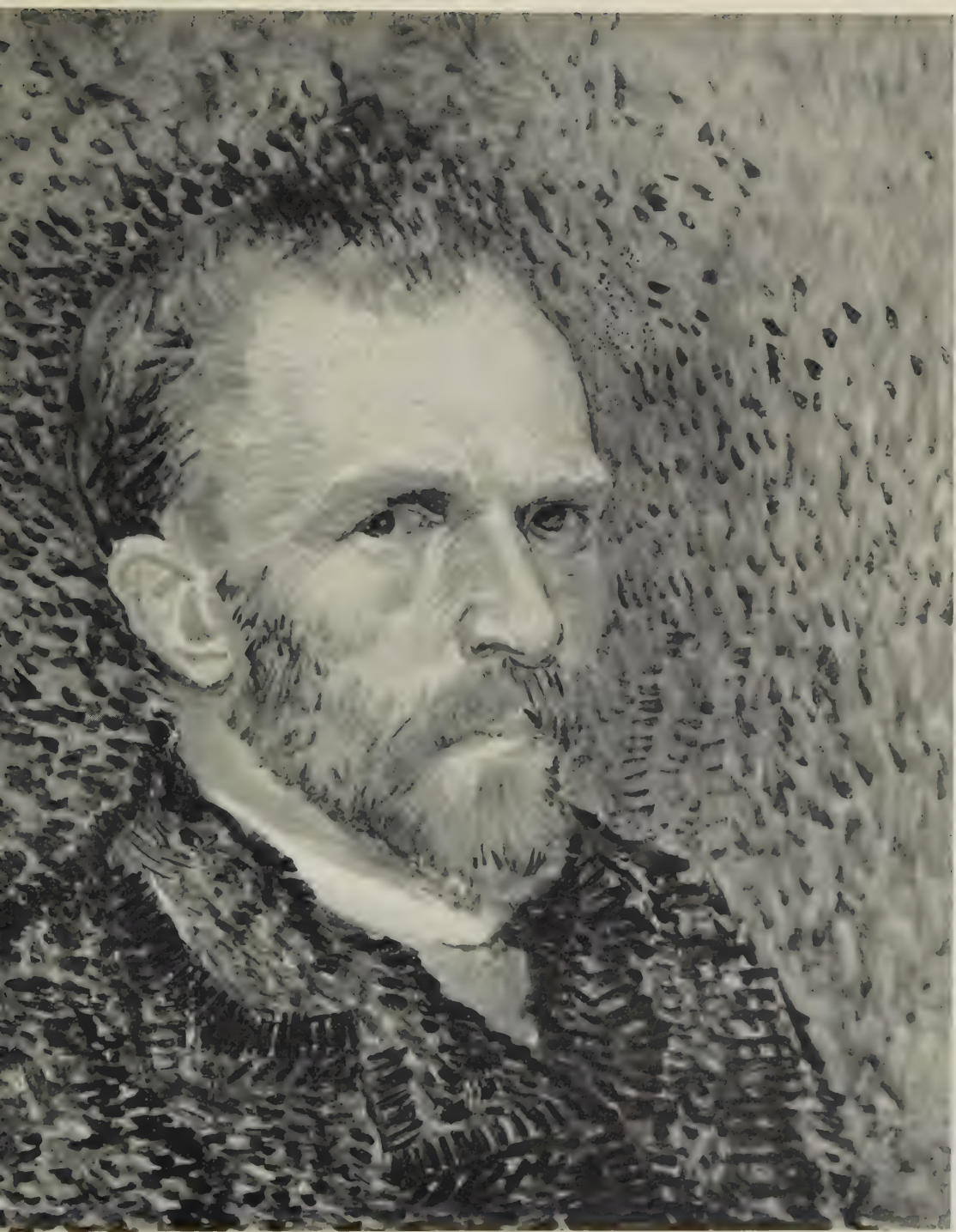
The gaze of his pensive eyes in which
melancholy lingers is directed at the viewer.



Self-portrait. 1887
Property of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation
City Museum, Amsterdam

K. Bromig-Kolleritz

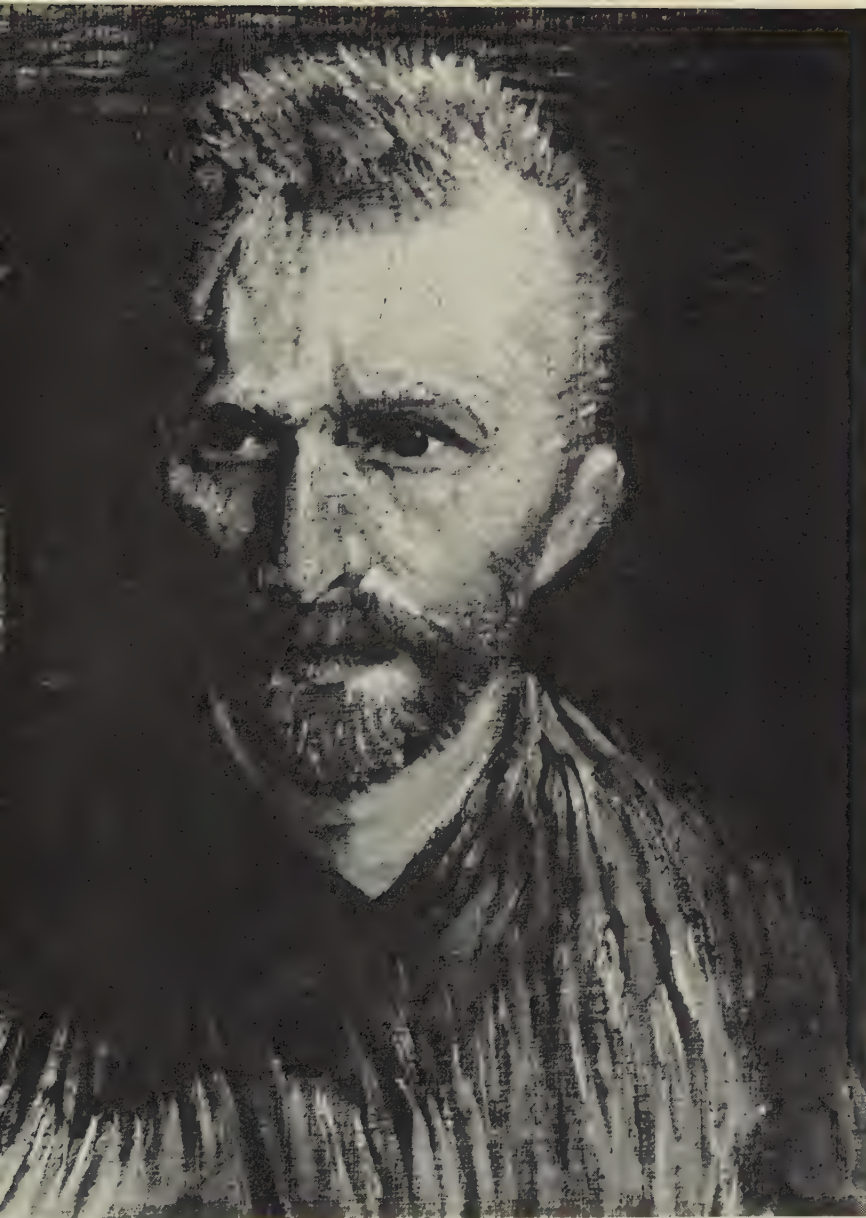
This artistic method suggests high will-power, unrest and tension, which have a bearing on the physical and psychic manifestation of shape in these works.



Self-portrait, 1887
Property of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation
City Museum, Amsterdam

To his sister

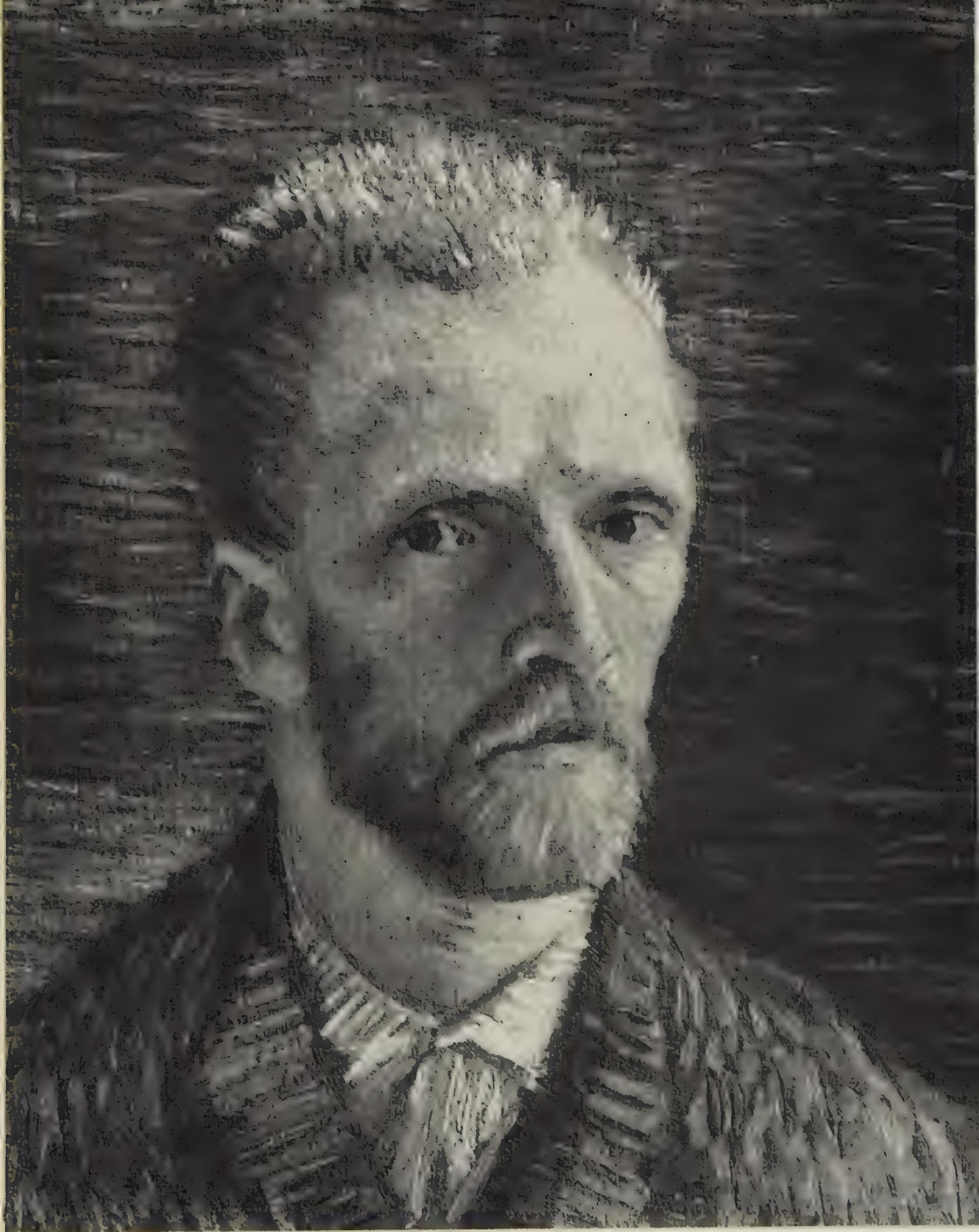
... and sometimes it makes me quite sad that I am just
like that ... at thirty-five ...



Self-portrait. Paris 1887
Property of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation
City Museum, Amsterdam

Hammacher

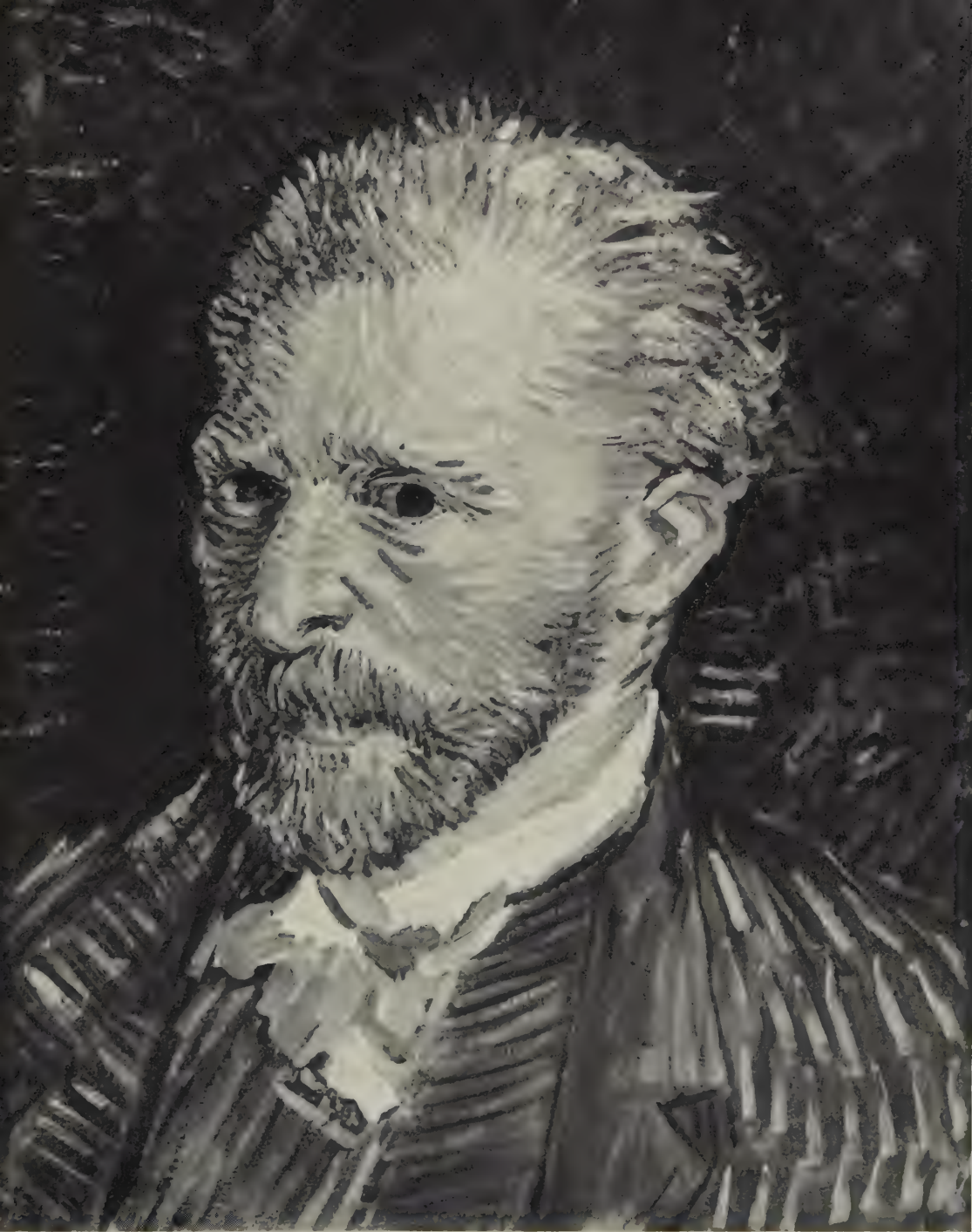
... the clothing is the same,
and yet another man seems to be looking at us,
not encouragingly or friendly
but rather discouragingly ...



Self-portrait. 1890
Louvre, Paris

To his sister

Do not think I am melancholic or one of those
who have become morose, bitter and choleric ...



Self-portrait with palette and easel. Paris 1888
Property of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation
City Museum, Amsterdam

To his sister

The face against the background of a grey-white wall.
You may say that in some way it resembles
the face of a corpse – like in the book by van Eeden
or something – well, it is just such a face,
and it is no easy matter to paint oneself.



Self-portrait with straw hat and pipe. Paris 1887
Property of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation
City Museum, Amsterdam

To his brother

I am not pessimistic about the future,
but I see many difficulties ahead, and sometimes
I ask myself whether these difficulties
may not be stronger than me.



Detail of self-portrait "à l'ami Gauguin"

Arles, September 1888

Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University,
Wertheim Collection

To his brother

I wrote to G., that if I am permitted to give
an undeserving degree of importance to myself
in a picture, I have tried not to portray just myself
but rather to draw the likeness of an
impressionist in general. I have imagined this
portrait to be that of a priest worshipping
the eternal Buddha.



To his brother

I am now drawing my self-portrait.
I have the same ash-grey colouring.
If we are not painted in colours we are
not properly portrayed. For the very same reason
I have taken great pains to find a combination
of fallow and pink-grey hues, I dislike black photography...
to live in natural surroundings
and to be just an ordinary citizen...



Self-portrait with pipe, cap and ear dressing

Arles 1889

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Leigh B. Block, Chicago, U.S.A.

To Gauguin

During a brain fever or spell of madness –
I don't quite know how to describe it –
my thoughts have sailed many seas.



Self-portrait with palette. Saint-Rémy 1889
John Hay Whitney Collection, New York

To J. Russel

Although there is nothing happy about being ill
I have no right to complain because
it appears to me that, thanks to nature,
illness is a means to give us new life and hope,
to heal us, rather than constituting an absolute evil.



Detail of self-portrait,
Saint-Rémy, May 1890
Louvre, Paris

To his brother

Today I am sending you my self-portrait.
You will have to look at it for some time.
I hope you will see that my features are calm
although my gaze is emptier than it used to be.



and most creative period. In fact, this knowledge saved him as long as there was still hope of saving him: "To write down notes or to make a little sketch when you are outside, you definitely require a strongly developed feeling for outlines; that is most important for executing a drawing." On another occasion he wrote: "When I see how some of the painters here just dabble around confusedly with their water-colours, I say to myself now and then: 'My good sir, it is your drawing that is at fault!'" Van Gogh emphasized that feeling for outlines is not inborn; "it is acquired, first of all, by observation, then by painstaking work and by thorough searching, and finally it is imperative that anatomy and perspective are also studied." These confessions are most important, because they make us realize that he was never a "romanticist" and "charlatan painter," belonging to the "fringe" as

Painters are commonly imagined to be. Nothing is more touching about him than the fact that he never allowed himself to become lost in whims and fancies. As early as 1882, eight years before his death, he confessed: "It is the duty of a painter to become deeply absorbed in nature and to use his entire intelligence so that he may be able to express his feelings in his work to make it intelligible for others." He also said: "It is by no means commendable to 'play to the gallery,' that is to say, to paint with an eye on the buying public. In my opinion that amounts to cheating the connoisseurs. The great masters never did that sort of thing. They earned the sympathy which they gained sooner or later, by their frankness and honesty. That is all I know about it, and I don't think I need know more." Nothing is more important for the future than these early utterances of his about what he knew and what he was.

Van Gogh, too, was a painter.

Was he more than that, something of even greater significance?

He was a man, an unhappy man. Beethoven and Dostoievski were his spiritual brothers. He was a man who wanted to probe deep into the problem of being human, and into the problem of existing in God. Do we know whether he succeeded in fathoming it? He studied the Holy Bible with religious fervour. At first he intended to study theology. He taught as an assistant teacher. He preached as an assistant preacher. He did not succeed. Nevertheless, he taught and preached, glowing with missionary zeal. He did so in the Belgian Borinage, among coalminers who jeered and spat at him. For him, life had always been a passion, a way to Calvary. He was good,

he was true, he wanted to be a friend and a brother. He was full of temperament, friendliness and charm – but, we may ask, did people care for the friend, for the brother he wanted to be to them? They did not. They despised the man who wanted to be their friend. He, whose heart was as pure as gold, was soon on bad terms with everyone. Under no circumstances whatsoever would he sacrifice truth. He himself had experienced truth, he had suffered for it, and he had to acknowledge and proclaim it, because truth was an integral part of his own character, both as an artist and as a man – truth was, in fact, himself. It was so necessary for him to preserve this self, exposed as he was in such a merciless and threatening manner.

Gauguin cruelly rejected him when van Gogh sought brotherly collaboration. Not only collaboration, but even

more: van Gogh had been imaginative and daring enough to plan a synthesis in which the genius of individuals would be welded together to produce a work of united genius. Such synthesis would have represented maximum perfection unattainable by any one man. An absurd idea, to be sure, as high-flown as it was inspiring to him as an artist. Did he not know that no star would ever move along the same path described by another star?

He, too, was a painter.

He was one of the most determined of painters – decided to proclaim originality, force and beauty of vision. But his painting was not dictated by professional considerations only, nor was it painting purely for art's sake. It was not governed by romantic ideas. From Arles to St. Rémy and to the tremendous “Crows over a Wheatfield” of

Auvers-sur-Oise, just before he broke down, his paintings were his Apocalypse.

It was a desperate and courageous struggle against the Scourge of God which had already begun to flay him. He had realized that, and he did not flinch. He was still hopeful, and full of comforting prospects of the future. "As far as I can judge," he wrote, "I am not really insane. You will see that the pictures I have painted in the meantime are restrained and are not inferior to others." He knew that nothing could be more dangerous than to daydream. "Our task is to think and not to dream." He was aware of the danger of giving way to emotions, of aimless drifting and of neglecting the stern duty to remain "objective." No matter whether he drew shoes or chairs, flowers or cafés, landscapes or portraits: his knowledge of outlines, of the technique of colouring were all summoned

to save his soul. To him "the object became the symbol and guarantee of mental health" (Meyer-Schapiro). He spoke of the "comforting, familiar look of things" and said: "I love things that are real, things that are possible." The pictures created by him were in his own words "lightning conductors of his illness."

In a letter to his brother we find a passage which throws a light on the deeply moving process of his heroism "... the more so as I believe that these pictures show what I cannot express in words, namely, the health and comfort I find in country life." Those were his words when he spoke of paintings which appear to us full of glowing colours and leaping flames, which are tremendous tempests of creative passion – to him they were documents of objectivity, havens of rest and comfort. In this manner he mastered and translated into pictures

his own harrowing mental experience. His paintings are cut across the canvas like a whiplash, a flaming shorthand notation of his mental destruction and torment, and at the same time they brought peace and consolation. They came to his rescue with outlines, with colour which he carefully analysed, with perspective, the objective depiction of a tree, of a shoe, a chair, a café, a constellation of stars. This was true, tragic, deeply moving heroism. The "Crows over a Wheatfield" are the last, remorselessly gigantic witness of this struggle. The cornfield is ablaze, apocalyptic horsemen sweep the skies, the three paths represent a brutal reversal of perspective, and the crows are flying towards him like demons of terror. This was the breaking-point and the end. He put an end to his life, a life full of torment, affliction and human passion. — Ecce homo.



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